

Iphoneography as an emergent art world

new media & society

2016, Vol. 18(1) 62–81

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DOI: 10.1177/1461444814538632

nms.sagepub.com



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Abstract

The iPhone has come to be one of the most popular and widely used cameras because of its ubiquity and the ease with which images can be uploaded directly to sites like Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter. The introduction of photography “apps,” like Hipstamatic or Instagram, adds layers of aesthetic capabilities not previously available within the camera. These capabilities have attracted artists seeking technologies for new media of artistic expression. Drawing on Becker’s theory of “art worlds,” this article describes the ways in which iPhone photographers, or iPhoneographers, engage in the process of art world building. Through online ethnography and semistructured interviews, this study reveals the ways iPhoneographers are creating, sharing, and critiquing their work. The practices of iPhoneographers are not unlike those of artists engaged with new media throughout history, and indicate patterns of remediation. Through their activities, the iPhoneography community is grappling with issues about the values, practices, aesthetics, and even aura of iPhoneography, and in doing so, they are building and legitimating a new art world.

Keywords

Art worlds, aura, legitimation, remediation, iPhoneography

While mobile phone photography has been prevalent for some time (Davies, 2007; Ito, 2003; Kindberg et al., 2005; Nightingale, 2007; Villi, 2007), the introduction of smartphones and their countless photography apps has changed the field of cameraphone photography in several important ways. First, the ability of the phone to share images on the Internet or via email, makes it a significantly faster, more convenient tool for distributing

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photography than traditional cameraphones. In 2010, the most popular camera among Flickr users was the iPhone 3G (Grobart, 2010). The Internet capabilities of smartphones significantly lower the barriers to the sharing of photography through social media because one can directly send images to the web through the handheld device. Second, as compared to earlier cameraphones, smartphone app capabilities make it not only a means of photo taking and photo sharing, but also a means of photo editing. This stage of the production process is an important step for many digital photographers. The additional use of apps to both shoot and edit the photos further differentiates smartphones, and the iPhone more specifically, from earlier cameraphones because users have access to hundreds of apps that create unique looks or mimic old film styles. As a user interviewed for a *New York Times* article put it, “I have 40 photo apps on my iPhone—it’s like having 40 different cameras with you all the time” (Grobart, 2010). The ubiquity of the phone, the convenience of image sharing, and the world of apps have provided the tools by which groups of smartphone users are engaging in emerging social practices that raise old questions about photography, technology, and art.

The rise of smartphone photography with apps has brought about concerns for the artistic form of photography in some circles. For example, one debate about such apps garnered national attention when “A Grunt’s Life,” a series of photographs depicting soldiers’ lives in Afghanistan (featured in Dao, 2010), was shot with the Hipstamatic app and won third place in the Picture Of the Year international (POYi) contest. Some members of the photojournalism world were up in arms, calling the decision the “death of photojournalism” (Buchanan, 2011; Chip Litherland, 2011). Winter (2011), the artist who shot the images, defended his work, saying, “I will always stand behind these photographs and am confident in my decision that this was the right tool to tell this particular story.” The decision, he said, comes down to aesthetics and content. Moreover, this example demonstrates the tensions surrounding the intersection of photography, art, and iPhones.

This study sought to explore this emerging culture of iPhoneography, a community of people who use the iPhone and its various photo apps to create, edit, and distribute photographic art. Using Becker’s (2008) concept of art worlds, we understand iPhoneography as an emergent community of actors who produce, consume, and legitimate artistic expressions. We aim to situate iPhoneography in larger debates about art, media, and social practices to provide empirical evidence for what Sheller (2012) calls, “mobile mediality” or the ability of mobile media to “produce new relations of people to space, community, interaction and community” (p. 1). We argue that the practices surrounding iPhoneography represent important moves in the sociology of visual media. As iPhoneographers define, engage, and debate the artistic merits and characteristics of iPhoneography, they reveal long-standing debates about the interplay between photography, technology, and art.

Background

Remediation

iPhoneography is only a recent development in a long history of confluence between media, culture, and technology. While the medium itself is new and draws on new technologies, the practice is part of larger pattern of the use and reuse in visual media. In this

sense, iphoneography is one of many examples of the ways that new media are in conversation with their predecessors through the process of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). New forms of media adopt, adapt, and, ostensibly, improve upon media from which they evolved; as such, they are not independent of their predecessors. Rather, they are constantly in conversation with their predecessors. Both the new medium and the old participate in this conversation as a method of legitimation. Remediation is not limited to new or digital media; Bolter and Grusin (1999) argue that all media are forms of remediation:

What remains strong in our culture today is the conviction that technology itself progresses through reform: that technology reforms itself. In our terms, new technologies of representation proceed by reforming or remediating earlier ones, while earlier technologies are struggling to maintain their legitimacy by remediating newer ones. (p. 19)

Remediation is made up of what Bolter and Grusin (1999) call the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy (p. 21). To aim for immediacy is to attempt to erase the medium altogether and to create a seamless illusion of reality. Hypermediacy might be described as the other side of the same coin, drawing attention to the media with which the viewer is engaged and creating a sense of hyper awareness of the medium itself. The lens of remediation helps to place iphoneography in historical and cultural context by drawing attention to the conversation between iphoneography and photography, as well as other visual media.

Historical developments in photography have not only changed the technical features and apparatuses possible for image capture, but also raise ongoing questions about professional and artistic authority as well as the essence of art itself. Early battles were fought over the nature of photography as an art form, and these are echoed in the debates that surround the use of instant photography, digital photography, digital photo editing (the use of Photoshop), and so on (Price and Wells, 2000). For example, technological developments throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries shifted photography from a professional craft into a mass amateur activity. In particular, George Eastman of Eastman Kodak is credited with fundamentally transforming photography from a professional to an amateur industry (Jenkins, 1975). Prior to Eastman's advancements, the professional photographer needed technical skills to both take photographs as well as produce the photographs. According to Jenkins, the most significant contribution of Eastman is that he was the first to de-couple photo taking from the production process with his advent of the amateur Kodak camera and roll film. Thus, the person who took the photo was no longer the same individual who had to develop and print the photo. Those technical production skills could be outsourced. Analogous technological shifts can be seen in the development of iphoneography. The iPhone re-couples the processes of photo taking, editing, and producing into one mass market device. The technological capabilities of the smartphone do not necessitate additional steps or systems in the photography process.

Theorizing photography

The massification of photo taking and making that technology has facilitated over the last 100 years has been noted by many scholars (e.g. Benjamin, 1972; Bourdieu, 1996;

Sontag, 2001). While the technological elements of photography influence the photographer and image, Flusser (1983) argues there is also a magic to photography that allows us to eternally return to the world depicted. This magical element is also related to one of the key tensions that arises in photography and visual media concerning the notion of aura. Benjamin (2001) defines aura as that which evokes an artwork's (or natural object's) uniqueness and permanence. Though Benjamin (1972) grants that some early photographs possess aura, he argues that most reproducible visual media like photography or film cannot embody aura, but at best simulate it, "The photographers in the period after 1880 saw their task in simulating that aura through all the arts of retouching" (p. 209). But Benjamin's writing on aura is somewhat ambiguous, and some have suggested that aura is not a quality of artifact per se, but a state which the viewer of an artifact experiences (Bolter et al., 2006), or that it, in the case of photography, it is the subject of the photograph that possesses this magical quality (Crimp, 1980).

Bolter et al. (2006) re-examine Benjamin's concept of aura in the context of virtual and mixed reality. They suggest that digital images can work with analog images and live action, and that these complex relationships offer opportunities for auratic expressions. Aura is not dead with reproducible visual media, they claim, but rather, is constantly lost and found again, existing in a permanent state of crisis:

We become aware of aura in art through a rivalry or interplay of new and traditional media forms. What Benjamin characterizes as the decay of aura in photography and film is simply an expression of this interplay in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. (p. 32)

Visual media artists today can continue to explore auratic expressions, though now it might be one of any number of aims in various artistic forms of expression, rather than the ideal artistic goal.

Art world as social world

The cultural significance of photography has not been dictated by technological advancements alone, but also shaped by its evolving social practice (Wells, 2000). Bourdieu's study of photography revealed photography as a process of "collective identity formation" (Bourdieu, 1996; Gonzalez, 1992), where photography became a way of integrating families and of indexing family occasions like weddings and holidays. However, Bourdieu (1996) identifies other kinds of photographic practices beyond this ritualized use. More specifically, some photographers rejected the symbolic norms of photography and formed camera clubs to help them establish a new practice (Castel and Schnapper, 1996). Members of these clubs, mostly men, focused on either aesthetics or on the technology of photography rather than its ritual social function. The goal for these clubs was to legitimize their work as valuable cultural products through their superior knowledge of the technical. Thus, passionate photographers developed a collective technological aesthetic, which in turn bestowed legitimacy on them as photographers (Bourdieu, 1996).

Similar questions regarding artistic authority and technological expertise arise with iPhoneography. In particular, with the purchase and potential integration of Instagram (a social photo app that allows users to upload and share photos easily, and incorporates a

series of filters that change the appearance of the photos) into Facebook, the need for iPhoneographers to distinguish themselves from the ordinary Facebook users arises. Thus, this article explores the processes of iPhone users who seek to legitimate themselves and their photographic practices, like Bourdieu's (1996) members of camera clubs did 50 years ago.

The process of legitimation is indicative of the formation of a new art world (Becker, 2008). Becker defines an art world as the patterns of collective activity surrounding the production of a specific form of artistic expression (Becker, 2008; Van Maanen, 2010). It is important to note that Becker's conception of art worlds, as opposed to Danto's (1964) art world, specifically makes room for multiple social worlds, each with their own rules, roles, and patterns, and that legitimate forms of art in one such world may not belong in another. Situating artistic expression such as iPhoneography within an art world framework forces us to look beyond the technical system that makes art possible and to explore the various actors, activities, and structures that legitimate those who self-identify as artists, or more specifically, iPhoneographers.

Therefore, this study explores the emerging iPhoneography art world through its practices and discourse. In particular, we were guided by four related research questions. First, how do those who self-identify as iPhoneographers come to define their artistic practice? Second, what are the characteristics of their artistic expression? Third, how does the iPhoneography community articulate and shape the boundaries of their artistic expression? And finally, what are the legitimating factors or characteristics of iPhoneography?

Case and approach

To examine the phenomenon of iPhoneography, we chose an interpretive qualitative methodological approach because we were interested in exploring the social practices of iPhoneography as an art world (Lofland et al., 2006). We identified the iPhoneography community on Twitter, Flickr, and on blogs and web sites associated with iPhoneography. In particular, two iPhoneography sites stood out because of the level of user activity and large number of the users: Pixels and Hipstamatic.

The primary site through which recruitment began, Pixels: The Art of the iPhone, or pixelsatanexhibition.com, is curated by Knox Bronson. Pixels primarily operates as an online gallery that publishes images created and edited solely on the iPhone, but Bronson has also organized several brick-and-mortar (physical) shows in association with Apple, and has published magazines. We also reached out to Hipstamatic users through the Hipstamatic Facebook page and Flickr groups. Hipstamatic is one of the most popular iPhone photography apps in the app store (Ha, 2010; Madrigal, 2010; O'Grady, 2010). We chose these two initial points of contact because they had quite different models and potentially quite different audiences/users.

We began by approaching the site administrators, frequent posters, Facebook fans, and Twitter followers associated with the sites. In total, we conducted 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with those who self-identify as iPhoneographers. Fifteen of the people we interviewed were either connected to the Pixels site or recruited through Twitter re-tweets from connections made through Pixels. These informants tended to be connected through multiple means. For example, one iPhoneographer submitted images

to Pixels, but also had his own web site devoted to interviewing other iPhoneographers. Other participants submit some of their images to several other iPhoneography sites like Pixels, or participate in other online as well as brick-and-mortar gallery showings of iPhone images. Some of the participants first saw each other's work on Pixels, but then followed each other on Twitter and Flickr. This kind of overlap was not uncommon, providing an intricate web of informants who were all involved to a different degree. The benefit of such a sample is that it provides a view of the emerging iPhoneography community from diverse perspectives.

We also recruited and interviewed five iPhoneographers through the Hipstamatic Facebook page and Flickr group.¹ Interviews with the Hipstamatic users helped balance the perspective offered by the iPhoneography community on Pixel, and give an indication of other communities that are developing through the social use of the iPhone camera and photography apps. The participants we recruited specifically through Hipstamatic were quite loyal to the specific app (one took on the pseudonym of Hipstachick on Facebook and on her blog) as opposed to the community affiliated with Pixels, who tended to use multiple apps. While some of the 15 iPhoneographers recruited through Pixels also used Hipstamatic and entered in the Hipstamatic contests as a part of their iPhoneography, it was one of many tools with which they created and shared their images, unlike the five devoted Hipstamatic participants.

In addition to the interviews, which provide insight into the ways people interpret their own iPhone images, the communities to which they belong, and the work of others, for about 6 months we actively engaged in participant observation of the online iPhoneography community. We considered the web sites, Twitter feeds, Flickr groups, and Facebook pages associated with the community to help develop a picture of how these users engage in the process of iPhoneography as well as how they interact with one another.

Drawing on both the interviews and participant observation, we can begin to understand iPhoneography. Specifically, we explore iPhoneography as a social practice as well as an emergent art world in the process of legitimation.

The practice of iPhoneography

The iPhoneographers in this study had fairly different ideas about how to engage in iPhoneography, but their basic assumptions about what makes something iPhoneography were quite similar. The primary rule for iPhoneography is that images are taken and processed on an iPhone. According to one participant Gareth,

I think the idea of shot and edited on the iPhone—because never before did we have a device that could do that ... To be able to go to the store, download a new camera app or a new effect app and therefore to completely change the output of your capture device—we've never had that before, technically. And to be able to publish them and connect with social media through that same device, I think that is groundbreaking in terms of our relationship to photography.

According to the iPhoneographers we interviewed, several aspects of the iPhone were valuable to them as artists, and these characteristics have come to define the practice of iPhoneography. They also valued their ability to easily do everything from the same

device: they could take pictures, process them, and upload them all in the same place at the same time. Finally, they indicated that the ability to manipulate the images manually (in some instances literally, with their hands and fingers) was an important part of their practice.

Ubiquity

iPhones, like all mobile phones, are almost always carried with or on people. This is one of its most important attributes as a camera. The adage that the best camera is the one that is with you has become a mantra of iphoneographers like Chase Jarvis, and it was even repeated at an Apple event to reveal the iPhone 4S. Informants in this study frequently discussed their ability to use the iPhone to take pictures under almost any circumstances. For Dan, this meant taking images of the same mill pond each day and processing them to be something new. For Andy, this meant turning a morning ritual of a walk on the beach into a way to know the beach and creatures that inhabit it through photography. For others, like Kimberly, this meant taking pictures of the mundane, of things you would not have thought of photographing before, simply because you had your phone with you at all times. For Dixon and Gareth, it meant being able to take pictures on the street without making subjects uncomfortable or, at times, even aware that they were being photographed.

This ubiquity served the dual purposes of convenience for the iphoneographers and of inconspicuousness to potential subjects. Both of these purposes ultimately aim to restore immediacy to the photography by removing attention to the medium itself, and, instead, directly relating to the subject matter. Immediacy is evoked by the choice of subject matter that is part of everyday life or routine. Immediacy is also evoked by the minimization of the barrier between the photographer and her/his human subjects. Damon Winter, the photographer who used Hipstamatic to shoot soldiers in Afghanistan, remarked that the soldiers were more at ease with him when he was taking their picture with his phone than when he used his large DSLR cameras. The immediacy achieved through the ubiquity the phone offers is one part of the dual logics of remediation.

Sharing

Many of the participants cited easy publishing of photos as one of the things that made the iPhone a “revolutionary” tool for photography. Since most iphoneographers share their images from the iPhone rather than uploading to a computer first, convenience in uploading is a very important to them, in fact, some said they would not participate in a site that did not facilitate online sharing. The methods by which iphoneographers share their work have implications for how the community is constructed as well as the articulated boundaries of what is valued. Although multiple tools are available, most iphoneographers whom we interviewed and on the web sites we explored upload to Flickr, Tumblr, or their own blog, which then triggers a tweet with a link to the image to their followers on Twitter. The Hipstamatic users we interviewed used Facebook more often than the other iphoneographers. Many described a hierarchy in terms of uploading: they would upload all of their work to a personal blog or Flickr feed and select images to tweet, and then, of those, they may choose some submit to curated sites or contests.

Dan considered Twitter “the center of the iPhoneography world.” It is a place where anyone “can comment on photos within seconds of upload.” Since, at the time these interviews were conducted, Twitter posts were simple 140-character texts, iPhoneographers would post a link to an image hosted somewhere else, usually Flickr, Tumblr, or a personal blog.

Feedback is an important part of sharing within the iPhoneography community. Once an image is uploaded, there are several ways for others to provide feedback. Many felt that in order to receive feedback, they were obliged to give feedback to others. On Tumblr or Flickr, it is easy to click a small star or heart to “fav” an image. On Flickr and on some blogs it is also easy to leave comments. For many iPhoneographers, the preferred method for giving feedback is to re-tweet one another’s images; however, some said that due to the high volume of tweets and re-tweets of images, this system was no longer practical.

The use of twitter further emphasizes the ubiquitous nature of iPhoneography. Not only does the iPhone’s ubiquity allow for the aesthetic capturing of public space, but the immediate social sharing of it turns the conversation about the iPhoneography into a “real time” conversation. Through this conversation, the different aesthetics described in the next section become legitimate practices for groups, or subworlds, of iPhoneographers, rather than for individuals.

The artist’s hand

The third key practice of iPhoneography is the manipulation of photographs through apps or what we call the presence and visualization of the artist’s hand in the iPhoneographic image. Just as analog photographers used darkroom techniques to “interrupt” perfect images (Benjamin, 1972), some iPhoneographers use apps to introduce new characteristics to images, or re-introduce characteristics that were once inherent in the processes of earlier photography. By doing this, they call attention to or hypermediate (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) the iPhoneographic art. There are several methods of image manipulation, some of which are contentious among iPhoneographers.

Some images are created using filters that can be determined beforehand (as in Hipstamatic) or applied afterward (in apps like Tiffen’s Photo FX and Instagram). These filters are selected and then automatically applied over the entire image. Other apps allow for manual manipulation of images using hands and fingers (see Figure 1).

Some informants described iPhoneography as painting on their photographs. For them, the tactile feeling of manipulation through app-ing with the iPhone’s touchscreen was much more like painting or sculpting than analog picture-taking with a camera. “It allows me to be more of an artist than a photographer,” Jody said of working with apps on the iPhone. For these informants, apps literally re-introduce the hand of the artist, thus re-creating aura within their iPhoneography. App-ing within the iPhoneography community allows for the introduction of the human touch into the digital production of photography, thus re-introducing aura into the photographs. In an era of permanent aura crisis, the apped image becomes a means through which artists can feel like they are introducing originality and authenticity into their digital art.

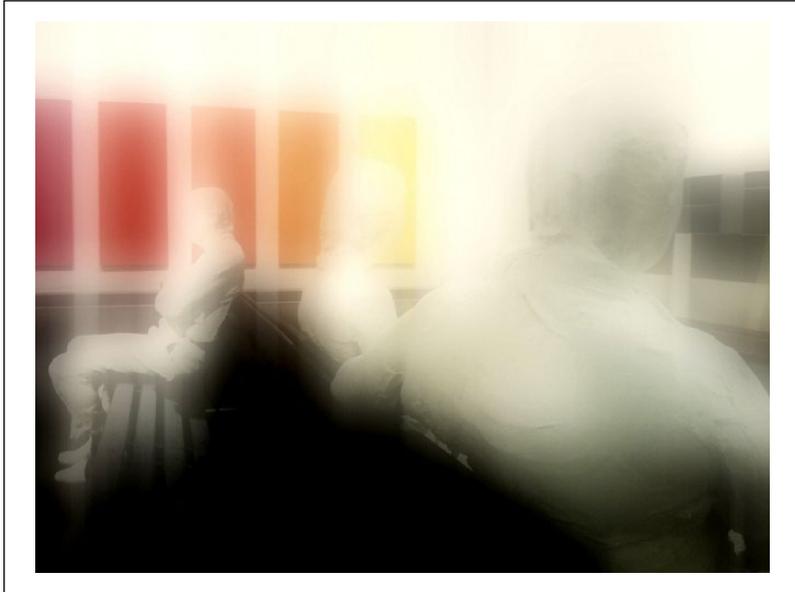


Figure 1. Edgar Cuevas @edicaves.

The aesthetics of iphoneography

The iphoneographers we spoke with had widely different processes and ideas about iphoneography, but in spite of these differences, their basic assumptions about what it meant to engage in iphoneography were quite similar. The primary rule for iphoneography is that images are taken and processed on an iPhone. Some participants drew a strong distinction between iphoneography and photography. According to Knox, the curator of pixelsatanexhibition.com, “the medium is defined by the device.” For Knox, this meant that the product should not look like traditional photography, but should have its own aesthetic. In the same conversation he said, “If you really want to do photography, get a camera.” Other participants drew a similar line regarding the technical distinction between iphoneography and photography, but saw less of an aesthetic distinction. The difference between iphoneography and not iphoneography was complicated by the introduction of the iPad, as well as the role iPhones might play in traditional photography. One participant, Gareth, initially posted only photos taken and edited with an iPhone on his blog, but after some time, he did a series, which he edited both on his laptop and on the iPhone and compared:

Gareth: In some cases the ones which I produced on my iPhone had a nicer aesthetic to them than ones which I made—which I played with on my Mac. But sometimes it was the other way round as well ... when I set up my iPhone blog the point was that everything was shot and edited and published from my iPhone.

Interviewer: So making that transition, is that where you leave the realm of iphoneography and enter the realm of ...?

GARETH: Photography, yes ... I also think that sometimes it is a good camera, and you can just use it as a capture device ... That is the crossover between iphoneography and just ordinary photography.

Although most participants agreed that the title of iphoneography was reserved for iPhone images that were not processed at all or that were processed only using the phone, they had differing but equally strong opinions about how and when to app. Their individual philosophies about the art of iphoneography fell into three categories, or three aesthetics. Although we discuss each separately, it is important to note that while some iphoneographers adhered to a specific aesthetic, some dabbled in two or all three approaches to iphoneography, and some might have strong elements from more than one approach in a single image.

The “Apped” aesthetic

The motto on the top right corner of the Pixels web site is “app that bitch ’till it sings.” This invitation to heavily alter the raw images follows the line of thought that iphoneography is something separate from photography, and the aesthetic that individual iphoneographers develop for themselves should also be quite different from more realist photography. See Figures 1 and 2 for very different images that both belong to the apped, or art aesthetic. Regardless of the degree of app-ing, all participants agreed that the initial image must be strong. Within this apped aesthetic, the initial photograph alone does not determine the whole image’s value.

An example of the apped aesthetic is what are called remixes or re-visualizations. Often made from nudes, which, as Jody explained, are harder to come by, the remixes are raw images taken by one iphoneographer and apped by another. When remixing images, both names appear in the credit. The apped aesthetic draws on hypermediacy not only to call forth the photograph as a medium to be refashioned and critiqued but also gesture toward other media, like collage and digital art, to draw attention to the medium itself, to showcase the varied ways images taken and shared on an iPhone can be manipulated with that iPhone.

The aesthetics of nostalgia

Many apps, including Hipstamatic, mimic old film styles. Images created using these apps often evoke a feeling of nostalgia among both iphoneographers and other users. Figures 3 and 4 could be considered examples of nostalgic images. The aesthetics of nostalgia have been understood as “a socio-cultural response to forms of discontinuity, claiming a vision of stability and authenticity in some conceptual ‘golden age’” (Grainge, 2000: 28). When asked about the nostalgia factor, some iphoneographers indicated it held a strong emotional connection:

It’s just kind of an emotional thing, its like, I know its crazy, because its like here we’ve got all these tools and all these cameras and this software ... and then we get the biggest kick by taking



Figure 2. Kimberly Post.

the top of the line up to the minute digital cameras and processing images to look like they're 30, 40, 50 years old. For me it's just kind of, I dunno ... For me, when I apply a look like that to an image, I'm doing it to invoke an emotional response, a nostalgic response in myself and hopefully the person who views it. (Marty)

Evoking nostalgia both for themselves and in their viewers was important to many iPhoneographers in this study, especially Hipstamatic users. Mario, the community director for Hipstamatic, said they designed the app with nostalgia in mind:

Part of what made those old cameras so great was that it had a plastic lens and that there was an emotion attached ... If you just use the regular iPhone camera, or any mobile camera, what you get is a digital representation of what you are looking at. And that's fine, but there doesn't seem to be like an emotional attachment to it.

Similarly, Reto, an iPhoneographer who was driving across country and documenting his journey using Hipstamatic, purposefully wanted the nostalgic aesthetic for his photos because it reminded him of his youth:

For my generation, this is kind of the pictures that we grew up with ... I just, you know, with all of the digital technology we yearn for the originality, for the old time-y feeling ... I just think it's what we're after in the end. I don't think too clean and HD is speaking to us, in a way.

The emotional connection to nostalgia seemed to be based on imperfections conspicuously missing in digital images, and while many of the informants who spoke of

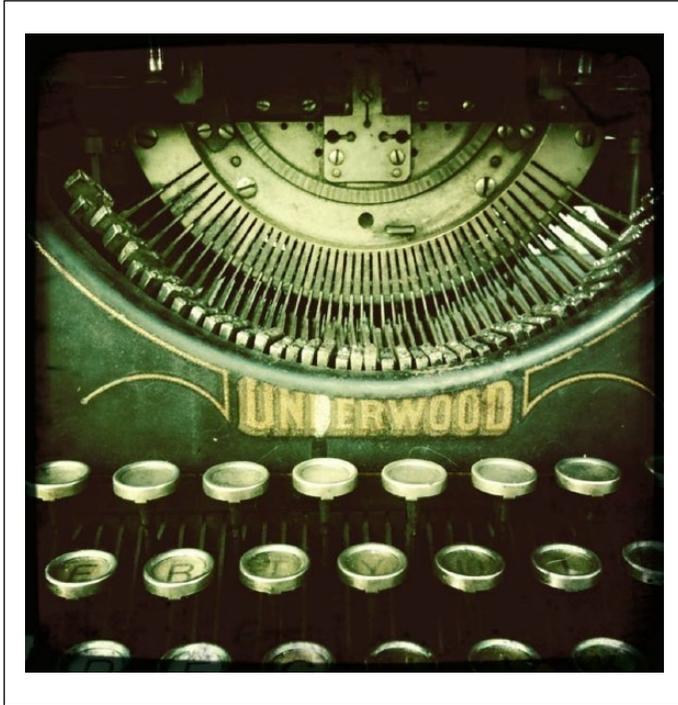


Figure 3. Jennifer Molley Wilson also known as Hipstachick.

nostalgia talked about their work as artists, much of the conversation turned to emotional attachments that stemmed from the social and ritual uses of the camera. While some iphoneographers were quick to dismiss such images as nostalgic rather than artistic, iphoneographers who experimented with this style were making artistic choices to do so. For them, creating an image that evokes the feeling of a childhood snapshot is as valid an artistic choice as layering two images together and masking parts of them to create a new landscape, a technique used by Patrick.

The nostalgic aesthetic is the most hotly contested of the three categories described in this article. The interplay between the hypermedia of app-ing the images to introduce what might even be called false aura (or less authentic aura) is matched by the immediacy these iphoneographers attempt to introduce into the images by evoking the analog medium of photography, with all of its imperfections. But the immediacy these iphoneographers aim for is not the immediacy of the subject in the photograph, but the analog photo itself.

Ubiquitous photography as an aesthetic

At the other end of the spectrum from the apped aesthetic, we found iphoneographers who believe the photo should come through and the apps should merely enhance the photographic image. As Gareth noted above, he believes the line



Figure 4. Dan Wilde.

between iPhoneography and photography is quite a thin one. He also finds the camera on the phone invaluable as a tool without the apps, in part because he is able to capture photographs he would not otherwise be able to take. iPhoneographers whose aesthetic leanings move toward the photograph are often wary of over-app-ing, suggesting that most uses of apps that create retro effects or art effects are “cheesy.” For these participants, the defining legitimating characteristic is not app-ing per se, but, instead, the defining characteristic of iPhoneography is the experience of using the iPhone camera in public. For these iPhoneographers, the ubiquity and mobility of the iPhone fundamentally are part of an aesthetic which privileges public space. These iPhoneographers, like Bourdieu’s amateur photographers, also value the limitations of the iPhone camera, and the artistic and technical skills needed to overcome these limitations. See Figure 5 for examples of this aesthetic.

While this kind of iPhoneography does not app photographs to the point where they look like a different medium, it does use apps to transform images to black and white, to adjust color balance, contrast, brightness, and clarity, and it does so on the phone. Often, the goal of these images favors the logic of immediacy, not only in the traditional sense in which the photograph attempts to draw the viewer into the photograph rather than to draw attention to the medium itself, but also in the sense that these images are meant to evoke photography; that is, to erase evidence that they are iPhoneography rather than photography.

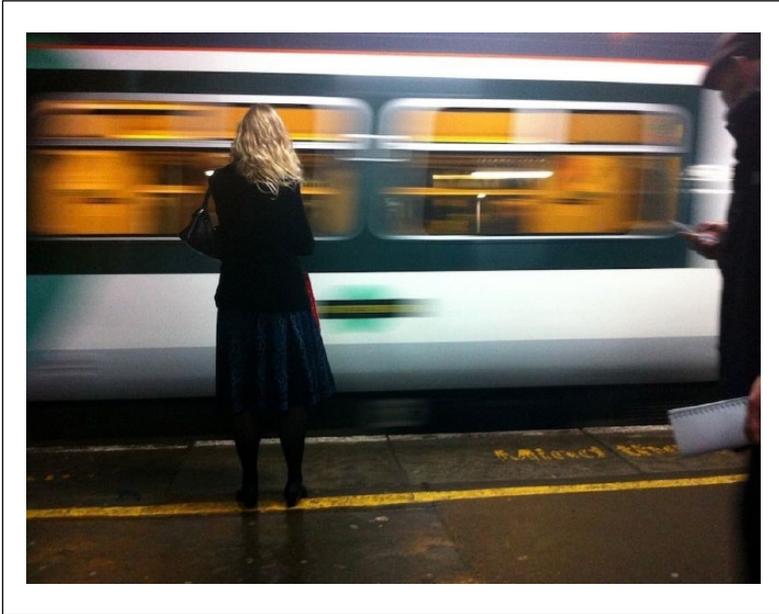


Figure 5. Gareth Bourne.

Legitimizing iphoneography

While the primary rule of iphoneography (that each image is taken and edited on an iPhone) remains the same for each of these aesthetics, each privileges different aspect of this rule, and each draws out different aspects of remediation, and each deals differently with the concept or crisis of aura. Within our sample, perspectives on the aesthetics of app-ing were wide ranging. Artists and curators whose sensibilities tend toward abstraction and app-ing have mixed opinions about retro filters like those found in Hipstamatic, and those who embrace these apps value the added constraints as well as the aesthetic they provide. Jennifer said,

My whole artistic thing is that I photograph objects as they are found. I never rearrange anything; it is photographed as it is, and so that kind of carries over into the Hipstamatic. It's what's been given to me; it's what's been placed in my path.

Jennifer prefers the Hipstamatic app because it is another constraint that defines her aesthetic. One must choose the Hipstamatic filter before one takes the photo, rather than changing or modifying the image after it has been taken. Andrew echoed her sentiment, describing Hipstamatic shots as more pure because of their close relationship to film cameras. For both Andrew and Jennifer, the idea of carefully considering a shot forced them to think through their decisions about composition as well as their “film and lens” choices:

That's what makes it, not better, but a little more pure. Because, um, it's the same as if you were using a film camera, you pretty much have to trust what you're looking at and see how the composition is gonna be in your head; what it might look like when it's taken, you have to trust your skills.

Although iPhoneographers may differ in their aesthetic choices regarding apps and composition, they are all deliberate in ways they go about their choices. Such deliberation and articulation of aesthetic help to build a legitimate art practice. For the iPhoneographers with whom we interacted, the work of legitimating iPhoneography as an artistic medium was hugely important. Many iPhoneographers were participating in gallery shows online and offline, and several were also organizing such shows. Jim organized a gallery show in Washington, DC, with the express purpose of legitimating iPhoneography within the larger art community:

The whole thing, for me, was to legitimate the art form ... The weekend after opening, right, there were people that were trickling in throughout the weekend kind of checking everything out, and you know I wouldn't tell them at first that all the photos were from a mobile phone. I'd wait till we walked around and show them each persons' panel and we'd get to the end, and I'd go, oh by the way these were taken with an iPhone, and their jaw dropped ... So that was the whole thing for me, you know, getting the art community to be involved now.

Like other iPhoneographers, Jim sought to use recognizable artistic practices, like a traditional show in a gallery, as a means of bringing iPhoneography into a more legitimate and acceptable artistic form. Some of the iPhoneographers we interviewed also created hardcover books of their photos or used online galleries as a means of legitimating their work as art. While these kinds of practices worked to legitimate iPhoneography within the broader art community, iPhoneographers also had to differentiate and legitimate themselves from the more casual iPhone camera user. This kind of legitimating work primarily occurred by discussing apps and commenting on each other's images through Twitter, blogs, and online galleries.

A large part of what defines iPhoneography has to do with what are perceived as legitimate practices. Confining iPhoneography to images taken and processed on the phone sets a level of rigor: in particular, this defining constraint helps to build the legitimacy. While photo taking, editing, and sharing can all be considered conveniences of the iPhone, the constraints of the small screen, limited inputs, and pre-defined apps also constrain artistic expression. It is with technological and artistic talent that iPhoneographers are able to overcome these constraints to produce visually and aesthetically appealing images. Working within the community-defined constraints of the iPhone was also important to legitimate iPhoneography as an art form.

As part of the legitimating process, iPhoneographers also actively engage in discussions about kind of app-ing, how much app-ing, and the goals of app-ing through blogs, comments, and responses on Twitter. For example, one of the most hotly contested discussions in the iPhoneography community is the use of Hipstamatic. We first began to understand this debate through postings on the subject from the authors of two of the most popular blogs devoted to iPhoneography, Lifeinlofi.com and iPhoneography.com.

The two often cross-post app reviews and other relevant posts, and when the author of *iphoneography.com* blogged about why he did not use Hipstamatic, most of the reasons he cited were technical: you cannot save the raw image; Hipstamatic takes quite a bit of time to process images. Aesthetically, he said Hipstamatic images had the potential make everyone's photos look alike.

Marty, the author of *lifeinlofi.com*, responded. In his reply, Marty defended the use of Hipstamatic, and wrote about the reasons he did use the app. For the most part he spent a good deal of time writing about its merits. However, toward the end of his post, he wrote the following:

My problem with Hipstamatic isn't with the app—it's with the jillions of new users who think that all it takes to create art is to take a crappy snapshot and app it up with Hipstamatic. It's still a crappy snapshot, only now it's wearing the look of a nice filter. You can't use Hipstamatic as a crutch in place of good photography.

This sentiment is common among *iphoneographers*, and was often repeated in interviews. The tension around Hipstamatic, articulated by Marty, was that it made it much easier for less technologically or artistically inclined individuals to create different kinds of visual images with their iPhones. Much of the legitimating discourse within the *iphoneography* community hence had to differentiate itself from these mass, app-happy, iPhone camera users. The debate around Hipstamatic, and more recently Instagram, proved fertile ground for such legitimating work.

The Hipstamatic online debate provoked much discussion within the *iphoneography* community. There were 35 comments in response to *iphoneography.com*'s original post and an additional 16 to *lifeinlofi.com*'s reply. On each post, comments about arguments for and against Hipstamatic furthered the debate. One commenter defended Hipstamatic because it introduced a way for him to use his cellphone camera: "I thought I'd hate the limitations of a cellphone camera, but Hipstamatic, with its tiny viewfinder and one-click shooting, forced me to rethink photography." While another focused on the legitimacy of the author: "It's nice to see a positive opinion about Hipstamatic from a 'proper':) photographer/artist for a change." Still another questioned the author's credentials, "Are we 'real *iphoneographers*'? If so, what does it take to become one?"

Back on the original post at *iphoneography.com*, technical discussion about the merits and drawbacks of Hipstamatic continued. One commenter discussed the drawbacks and lack of freedom, but ended by saying that, "I still use Hipstamatic, though I use it more for family-shots," drawing a distinction between his artistic and his social/ritual use of the camera.

What it meant to legitimately engage in *iphoneography* was being defined through these discussions, but on a broader level, we found that opinions on what it meant to be accepted as a legitimate art form also varied. For some, finding a specific aesthetic and set of rules through selective and careful curation, both online and in brick-and-mortar exhibitions, would help build an art world similar to the visual art worlds already well established. For others, legitimation meant thinking about visual art in new ways. Andy advocated not thinking of just an image or movie or anything else, but of something more like a small portable method of expression and representation that would allow us to

creatively express ourselves anywhere, any time. This again demonstrates the ubiquitous aesthetic of iPhoneography seen in both the content of the photos as well as articulated through the sharing and distribution of the iPhoneography.

Conclusion

iPhoneography represents an example of an emerging art world currently in the process of legitimation by distinguishing the process, artifacts, and actors from mass consumers of iPhones and photo apps. This study sought to document the process of legitimation for this community so as to reveal insights into the larger social processes circulating between art, media, and everyday practice. This study demonstrates the importance of community discourse in defining, distinguishing, and legitimating commercial media use for artistic form. The aesthetic and technical debates within the iPhoneography world work to legitimate iPhoneography as an art world. Like Bourdieu's (1996) camera clubs, a large part of the reason iPhoneographers engage in social activities together is to engage in the creation of iPhoneography as a legitimate art form. The very fact that they are interacting with one another, agreeing or disagreeing on what counts as iPhoneography helps establish legitimacy. The development of this iPhoneography community and the ways in which individual iPhoneographers talked about their artistic process work to demonstrate the importance of the legitimation in the emergence of an art world (Becker, 2008).

This study demonstrates the contentious relationship between consumer products, digital technology, and artistic expression. The tensions this triad raises can be understood through the sociology of art as worked out by the art world itself. The actors, practices, and discourse help to identify and establish the boundaries of what is considered iPhoneography but will need to be continually reconsidered in light of technological advancements and changes in community aesthetics.

As new media are created and new art worlds form, remediation plays a large role in the legitimation process. Bolter and Grusin (1999) point out the ways that media enter into conversations with their predecessors, and those conversations form the controversies and discussions that facilitate legitimation. In the case of iPhoneography, those who use apps to transform their images are in conversation not only with photography, but also painting, collage, and multimedia artworks. iPhoneography illustrates remediation through tensions between immediacy and hypermediacy, and these tensions form the basis for debates concerning the authenticity and aesthetics of that which is called iPhoneography. The feeling that the medium itself is a part of reality is clear in the apped and nostalgic aesthetics described above. For the apped aesthetic, the layering and effects that remove the image from reality are like brush strokes in a painting that draw attention to themselves. The experience of viewing these images, then, is to observe the mastery of form, color, and texture found in the images. In the nostalgic aesthetic, the introduced light leaks, frames, and other imperfections evoke photography of the past, suggesting that the mechanical reproductions created by film cameras possess more aura than their current digital counterparts. Composition is still an important part of the image making process, but the aim is to use these introduced points of focus, these aspects of hypermediacy, to create a sense of immediacy by presenting the photograph as an artifact as well

as an image. These are two ways of using hypermediacy to achieve a sense of immediacy, and, in many cases, they are at odds with one another.

The discord between these different aesthetics (when there is discord—many iPhoneographers find value in more than one aesthetic) stems from the way the image makers evoke immediacy; each is vying for legitimacy by claiming to present a truer or more authentic experience of the medium. In other words, they are arguing over what constitutes aura.

The simulation of aura within photography becomes an aesthetic move, rather than medium-specific. Thus, it was in the darkroom that photographers could retouch photos to their particular taste and thus simulate aura in their artistic expressions. For iPhoneographers, retouching and photographic manipulation become auratic expressions reintroducing the artist's hand into the mechanical process. Nostalgic iPhoneography may find its aura by introducing properties found in older photographs. Nostalgic media become a mode of cultural mediation through which we can engage with the past while representing the present (Grainger, 2000).

The use of apps is at the center of the debates that aim to establish legitimation in the iPhoneography world. These apps allow for the re-introduction (or simulation) of aura in the process of digital photography. Many of the informants lamented the “too perfect” nature of digital photography, even in point-and-shoot cameras. Retro apps, like Instagram or Hipstamatic, often introduce grain, light leaks, and borders, all of which constitute a nostalgic aesthetic and help establish the image as unique. Moreover, some iPhone image manipulation goes beyond the selection of filters, requiring physical manipulation by the artist. For example, in some apps, iPhoneographers use their fingers to blur or sharpen select areas, to draw lines where the image should be cropped, or to add color or other painterly elements to their images.

iPhoneography is an indication that “The presence or decay of aura is not, as Benjamin suggested, predetermined by the choice of media technology or by the dominant technologies of the time” (Bolter et al., 2006: 36). Aura does not live or die by the medium, but is reinvented as artists embrace new media. iPhoneographers are reinterpreting aura through apps that draw attention to the medium itself, and to older forms of photography. Just as photographers after 1880 manipulated images in the darkroom to simulate the aura of early photographs (Benjamin, 2006: 207), iPhoneographers manipulate images on their phones to simulate the aura of analog photography. As Bolter and Grusin suggest, this simulation of previous forms of photography is, in turn, legitimated by the current simulation of these forms.

The case of iPhoneography reflects long-standing debates regarding art and technical reproduction. Both remediation and aura become lenses into the aesthetics of iPhoneography that help unpack the way iPhoneographers and photographers are wrestling with the use of technology. These debates, discourse, and practices are central to the legitimation process of iPhoneography as an emergent art world.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Cornell's New Media and Society group for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. A previous version of this article was presented at the 4S Annual Conference in Cleveland, Ohio, in November 2011.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Note

1. One of these users was also the Community Director for Synthetic, the company responsible for Hipstamatic.

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